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ADDRESS

BY

**The Honorable
George Bell Timmerman, Jr.**
Governor of South Carolina

AT

THE UNVEILING
OF THE
BUST OF
GENERAL ROBERT E. LEE



State House Rotunda
Columbia, South Carolina
January 21, 1958

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*Mr. President, Mr. Speaker, Members of the General Assembly, and
Guests:*

I am indeed grateful to have this opportunity to honor the memory of Robert E. Lee. As a military strategist, he has no peer in the annals of American history. But, his character alone places him upon the pedestal of true greatness. Today, both North and South recognize and honor him. He is one of the greatest of Americans. He is a symbol of the true character of the South.

Lee's views on constitutional government were expressed almost a century ago. Yet, his political philosophy is strikingly significant today. The "maintenance of the rights and authority reserved to the states and to the people", he wrote, are "not only essential to the adjustment and balance of the general system," but are also "the safeguard to the continuance of a free government" and "the chief source of stability to our political system."

The "consolidation of the States into one vast republic, sure to be aggressive abroad and despotic at home, will be," he added, "the certain precursor of that ruin which has overwhelmed all those that have preceded it."

Robert E. Lee was a statesman, reared in the Southern school of States Rights as interpreted by statesmen of the South.

He regarded slavery as an evil, and, in common with many of the landowners of his time, had liberated his slaves before the outbreak of hostilities.

But he believed that it would be a greater evil to impose emancipation by force. For this reason, he opposed anti-slavery agitation and "the storms and tempests of fiery controversy" that it engendered. He resented deeply the outside propaganda of the Abolitionist that played so large a part in bringing on eventual hostilities. It was the intolerance of Abolitionists and their determination to force their views upon others, that foreshadowed events marking Lee's path toward greatness.

On October 18, 1859, at Harpers Ferry, federal troops under Lee's command captured the notorious John Brown.

Three years earlier, Brown had led a band of Abolitionists in murdering five innocent people. They had objected to his views.

His capture by Lee's troops had followed his seizure of a United States arsenal, and his numerous meetings with other Abolitionists, including some of the most important of that time. They had conspired with Brown to force their views upon the South.

Although Brown was hanged for murder and treason, it was his philosophy of force that symbolized the sectional aggression that was to come.

The refrain:

"John Brown's body lies a'mouldering in the grave,
but his soul goes marching on".

became the chant of the invading armies against the South.

It is something of a paradox that, within a few months after Brown's capture and hanging, the field command of the Union Army was offered to Colonel Robert E. Lee by President Abraham Lincoln.

Lee's greatness can be measured in many ways. Much has been said and written about his ability as a military leader, his humility, and his devotion to duty.

But, his greatness was demonstrated nowhere more clearly than when faced with the most important decision of his career.

The offer of field command meant top advancement climaxing thirty-two years of military service. But, the spirit of Abolitionist intolerance had assumed the proportions of a war of aggression. For Lee, it meant that he would engage in a war against his own people. This, he refused to do. He declined the appointment and resigned his commission. Thus ended a career that began as a cadet in the Military Academy at West Point and included distinguished service in the Mexican War and as superintendent of the Military Academy.

We need not surmise how Lee felt. On the day of his resignation, he wrote his sister these words:

"With all my devotion to the Union and the feeling of loyalty and duty of an American citizen, I have not been able to make up my mind to raise my hand against my relatives, my children, my home."

From these few words, easily understood by all, the true character of Lee's greatness begins to unfold.

He chose to sacrifice his career and join in the defense of the South and the principles upon which it stood.

He had believed firmly in the Union but still more firmly in the defense of his own people and their right to be free from military intimidation.

On the eve of the war, Lee had this to say:

"The South, in my opinion, has been aggrieved by the act of the North. I feel the aggression and am willing to take every proper step for redress. It is the principle I contend for, not

individual or private interest. As an American citizen, I take great pride in my country, her prosperity and institutions. But I can anticipate no greater calamity for this country than a dissolution of the Union. I hope, therefore, that all constitutional means will be exhausted before there is a resort to force. . . . Still a Union that can only be maintained by swords and bayonets, and in which strife and civil war are to take the place of brotherly love and kindness, has no charm for me."

In August, 1861, Lee took command of the Confederate Forces.

It was Lee's devotion to duty that dictated his final decision—as indicated by these words on a plaque in the guard room of the Padget Thomas Barracks at The Citadel:

"Duty is the sublimest word in the English language."

He saw that his first duty was to his own people, regardless of the sacrifices.

After four years of bitter war, that devotion to duty had not wavered. Writing to an old friend, Captain James May of Illinois, July 9, 1866, Lee said:

"I must give you my thanks for doing me the justice to believe that my conduct during the last five years has been governed by my sense of duty. I had no other guide, nor had I any other object than the defense of those principles of American liberty upon which the constitutions of the several states were originally founded, and unless they are strictly observed I fear there will be an end to Republican government in this country."

His greatness was demonstrated further when he politely but firmly declined many substantial offers from commercial firms. Instead, he assumed the presidency of a small college, now Washington and Lee University, at an annual salary of \$1,500.00.

Upon being offered \$50,000.00 a year by a large company, Lee declined on the ground that it was work with which he was not familiar. When told that he would be expected to do no work; that only the use of his name was needed, General Lee replied: "Do you not think that if my name is worth \$50,000.00 a year, I ought to be very careful about taking care of it?"

In declining another generous offer to head a New York firm that would represent Southern commerce with immense sums of money at his disposal, Lee said:

"I am grateful but I have a self-imposed task which I must accomplish. I have led the young men of the South in battle;

I have seen many of them die on the field; I shall devote my remaining energies to training young men to do their duty in life."

On another occasion following the end of the conflict, he was quoted as saying:

"We are conscious that we have humbly tried to do our duty; we may, therefore, with calm satisfaction trust in God and leave results to him."

Thus unfolds the character of a great man.

Although the issues are not precisely the same today, forces comparable in many ways to those of a century ago are still gnawing at the foundations of our constitutional form of government, and with startling success.

If this trend is permitted to continue, the United States inevitably will meet the fate of so many other nations whose form of government has given way to dictatorship and other totalitarian forms.

As we dedicate this bust, it behooves us to seek a determination of what constitutes our duty, and, like Lee, devote ourselves wholeheartedly to that duty.